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Killing the Albino

Abstract

“Is that a bird?” the old man asks me, inching closer to the cage on my lap.

“It’s a rat,” I tell him.

“What kind of rat?”

“Albino.”

Cover Page Footnote

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August 14, 2015

Killing the Albino

Nonfiction by A.A. Balskovits

“Is that a bird?” the old man asks me, inching closer to the cage on my lap.

“It’s a rat,” I tell him.

“What kind of rat?”

“Albino.”

He peers over and spies the white fur and red eyes. Maybe he sees the tumor that’s been growing on her leg for a few months now, the same tumor that the vet said was not worth operating on, that bulbous lump, red and raw and veined where it rubs against the floor as she tries to walk, twisting her unused claws on her left foot in on themselves from disuse. The man grimaces, either from the tumor the human disgust at something so small, shrugs, and walks away.

It is never an easy decision to put something down, but I am fierce in my determination. After her cage mate, a black and white fancy rat suffered a stroke and stopped eating, the Albino has been alone. Rats, like everyone else, are social creatures. Singular, she is withdrawn and has stopped grooming everything except the tumor, which she licked with the same devotion she may have given her baby. She is suffering, the kind of pain she cannot communicate to me.

The vet handles her and tells me that rats just get tumors. That's why they're used in research. The Albino pisses on him, and while I know it is out of fear from being handled by someone she doesn't recognize, I am proud of her.

"You don't want to watch this," the vet says. I tell him I do.

I've watched family dogs get put down, and I remember them as dignified affairs. The vet hands you tissue while they set an IV into a paw, and you can touch your beloved until they sleep. Then they administer the killing drug, and sleep fades into nothingness, and it is sad, as any death is. They tell you to take your time leaving the room, to stay with the body as long as possible. They write you sympathy cards later.

But you can't kill a small thing in the way we fool ourselves is humane. I wonder if it would be kinder to strike her in the head with a hammer, or a brick, just one quick moment of pain and fear, and then it is all over. People, though, we like to drag death over time; we believe in miracles. If we just had a few more seconds, hallelujah could occur. But I cannot hit her on the head, and there is no hope of cures, so I subject her to this pantomime. Kindness and selfishness in equal measure.

The vet tells me they would typically jam a needle into a vein and release the poison, but her veins are too small, and rats too jumpy, so they have to gas her. He gathers The Albino into a clear cone, trapping her tail a few times. He manages to stuff her in. The Albino shits herself, that primitive reaction to terror, and claws at the side. Eventually, the gas works. The vet fills a syringe with pink liquid and shoves it into her heart.

Small things take a long time to die. We wait, and I am reminded that when life is small, all other life goes on without noticing: the vet takes the clock off the wall and sets it forward for daylight savings. He checks his phone. The Albino's chest moves up and down, though it slows. The tumor had begun to eat away at her, and her tiny ribs are vivid against her skin. Up and down.

The vet listens to her heart. "Still faint," he says. "Has her chest expanded?"

"I don't know," I say. "She was fat before the tumor."

"Might have one in the chest cavity then. That explains why I can't hit her heart."

He fills up the syringe and sticks her chest. He wobbles it around in circles, maybe hoping that if he can't hit the heart directly, he can puncture it open and she'll die that way.

Another ten minutes, he listens. “That’s it,” he says.

That’s it, of course, and there is not much left to do except go back to everything the way it was before. Those little things, they filter in and out. When I get home, I find an ant in my living room, and without consideration, or mercy, I press the weight of my shoe on it.

A. A. Balaskovits is a graduate of the MFA program at Bowling Green State University and is a PhD candidate at The University of Missouri. Her work can be found or is upcoming in *The Southeast Review*, *Gargoyle*, *The Madison Review*, *Permafrost*, and others. She currently lives in Clemson, South Carolina.